

White Coat Waste Takes Aim at Animal Research — From the Right

A conservative political consultant wants to end government funding for research involving animal subjects. Scientists call that a dangerous game.

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If there's any activist who can thrive in Donald Trump's Washington, it's Anthony Bellotti, a conservative political consultant who is adept at social media campaigns, at ease with the press, and fluent in the language of small-government politics. Bellotti worked on campaigns to defund Planned Parenthood, the women's reproductive rights nonprofit, and to end Barack Obama's signature Affordable Care Act.

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But his current effort, called the White Coat Waste Project, has what many might consider an unusual crossover appeal. The group aims to stop government-funded animal research, using a mix of Tea Party-ready rhetoric about government waste and heart-tugging appeals to animal-lovers of all political persuasions. Toward that end, Bellotti makes a straightforward pitch: Animal research, he argues, is cruel, unnecessary, inefficient, and expensive. Plus, much of it is funded by taxpayers, whether they like it or not. The solution, according to White Coat Waste's website, is to “drain the swamp” and “cut federal spending that hurts animals and Americans.”

“We’re taking an old issue in a new light,” Bellotti told me. “We’re building a broad left-right coalition for one issue we can all agree on — libertarian, vegetarian.”

In the past 12 months, White Coat Waste has focused particular attention on research conducted under the auspices of the Department of Veterans Affairs, shuttering one project in California, triggering internal investigations of a VA lab in Virginia, and helping to get an amendment through the House eliminating funding for VA dog research. (That amendment has not received Senate approval, but Bellotti's handiwork was enough to provoke a stern response from VA Secretary David Shulkin.) The Food and Drug Administration has also been a Bellotti target, and after more than a year of pressure from White Coat Waste, FDA commissioner Scott Gottlieb shut down an agency research project on nicotine addiction last month, over concerns about its treatment of squirrel monkey subjects.

The federal government spends billions of dollars each year — exact numbers are hard to come by — on research that involves animal subjects, ranging from fruit flies to primates. This research, agencies and scientists say, is essential for making biomedical advances. Shulkin, for example, argued in an op-ed late last year that canine research at the VA was crucial, because of the “distinct physical and biological characteristics humans and dogs share that other species do not.” Such research, he noted, has led directly to developments like the implantable cardiac pacemaker and the artificial pancreas — breakthroughs that “will make real differences in veterans' lives,” he said.

Indeed, the virtues of animal research — done humanely, and under strict protocols — are so embedded within the scientific and research communities that it would take more than one, small nonprofit to shut that work down.

Still, as White Coat Waste begins to score political victories, it poses serious questions: Can the organization reshape the conversation around animal research? And if so, how far can White Coat Waste go?

Bellotti formed White Coat Waste in 2013, but it wasn't until 2015 that the organization really started to grow. That year, Bellotti collaborated with the conservative talk show host and commentator Glenn Beck on a short

documentary called “Socialized Science.” The organization also received a \$100,000 grant from the Greenbaum Foundation, which gives millions of dollars to animal rights causes, and to date, has given nearly \$500,000 to White Coat Waste. In 2016, Bellotti hired Justin Goodman, a staffer and lobbyist for the advocacy group People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, or PETA, as his vice president of advocacy and public policy.

Bellotti explicitly frames White Coat Waste as a taxpayer rights outfit, not an animal rights organization, and he promises never to target private animal research. “It’s about your liberty to be forced to pay for something that you don’t like, don’t want, and don’t need,” Bellotti said.

The approach has pulled in people who might not otherwise show much interest in animal rights issues. Trump advisor Roger Stone, for example, hosted Bellotti on his Infowars show last month. And Pursuit (formerly known as Restore Accountability), a government-spending watchdog group aimed at millennials and founded by Tom Coburn, the former Republican Senator from Oklahoma, partnered with Bellotti on a recent report.

“Good campaigns win — and we’re winning — but great campaigns bring new people into the fight,” Bellotti told me. These are people, he continued, who “are saying, hallelujah, where have you been all my life? I never felt at home with the establishment animal groups.

“Yes, many of those voices are on the Republican side, conservative side, alt-right side,” he added, “but they are saying it.”

Still, White Coat Waste is not merely gaining support and participation from the right flank, and it has managed to find bipartisan traction in the current Congress. On the VA campaign, Representatives Dave Brat, a Republican from Virginia, and Dina Titus, a Democrat from Nevada, have been two of the organization’s most vocal supporters on the Hill. And the efforts to shut down the VA dog research in California last year were vocally supported by a host of Democrats in Congress, including Nanette Diaz Barragán, Tony Cárdenas, and Alan Lowenthal, among others. In February 2017, White Coat Waste’s leadership formed a political action committee to support candidates in the 2018 election cycle.

This combination of bureaucratic savvy and powerful allies can yield results and, so far, White Coat Waste has been most effective at targeting specific federal research programs, finding problems with their animal care procedures, and then applying public pressure through social media campaigns and high-profile partnerships. In late 2016, for example, White Coat Waste filed a Freedom of Information Act request for documents about the FDA study on nicotine addiction. The researchers were trying to understand how nicotine dosage levels affect the formation and maintenance of addictive behavior. Because scientists cannot ethically use human subjects in such experiments, the researchers proposed to use squirrel monkeys.



Visual: Undark Illustration; Photo via U.S. National Library of Medicine

Studies on small rodents often pave the way to observations on human subjects. But a conservative activist believes those studies shouldn’t be conducted on the taxpayer’s dime.

From the perspective of a taxpayer advocacy organization, the study does not seem like a high priority: It was funded by the FDA's Center for Tobacco Products, which receives its nine-figure budget from special user fees paid by the tobacco industry. (Asked why his organization targeted non-taxpayer-funded work, Bellotti responds that *all* FDA research involves taxpayer money in some capacity, and that the user fees are a kind of tax.)

From the perspective of an animal rights organization, though, this study was a natural target. It was basic research, meaning that it may not have immediate utility. It involved squirrel monkeys — tiny, charismatic primates — with catheters implanted in their bodies. And, according to the documents White Coat Waste obtained, four of the monkeys had died after research-related procedures.

The group described the research as “wasteful and cruel” and criticized the FDA for supporting work that “addicts baby monkeys to nicotine.” In September of last year, Bellotti enlisted primatologist Jane Goodall, who wrote a letter to FDA commissioner Scott Gottlieb questioning, among other things, why the FDA needed to learn more about smoking.

In response, a group of 46 tobacco and addiction researchers signed an open letter, published on the website of the animal research advocacy group Speaking of Research, challenging Goodall. The researchers argued that animal research was essential for understanding the biology of addiction, and they accused Goodall and White Coat Waste of misrepresenting the research.

What would happen if the federal government simply stopped doing animal research? “Biomedical progress stops in its tracks,” Buckmaster said.

In the end, though, Gottlieb suspended the study, and in January — after a long process — the FDA permanently shut down the experiment, citing animal welfare concerns. They also announced a third-party investigation into the agency's oversight of animal research, and the appointment of new Animal Welfare Council to oversee agency procedures.

A spokeswoman for the agency, Tara Rabin, did not answer a list of emailed questions from Undark regarding the decision to shut down the study, and soliciting more details about the welfare councils. But Amanda Dettmer, a senior editor at Speaking of Research and a behavioral neuroscientist who has worked with primates, expressed frustration with the FDA's decision. “It had the appearance of selectively responding to one party over the other,” she said of Gottlieb's reaction to Goodall's letter.

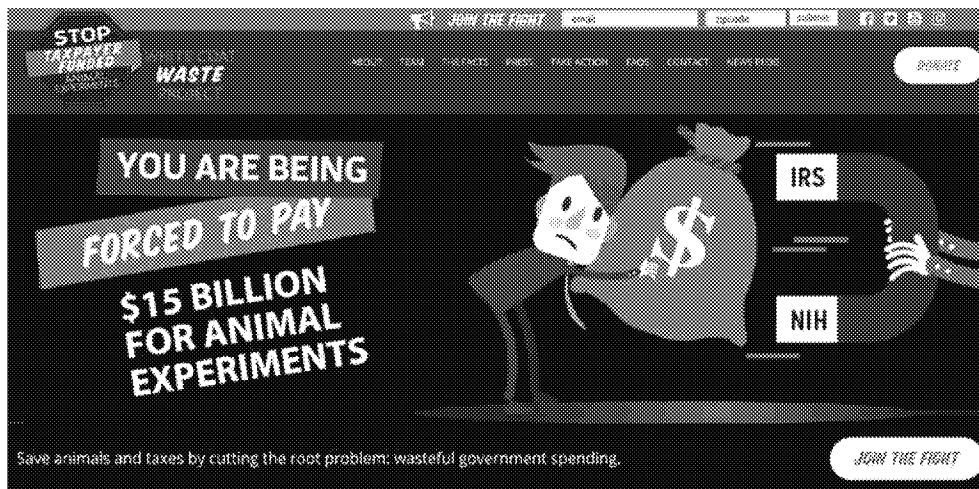
More broadly, Dettmer suggested, the kind of activism that Bellotti and his allies are practicing can seem reckless, if not downright delusional. “The fact of the matter is, we are not yet at a point as a society where we have an alternative,” Dettmer told me. “We're just not yet at a place where we can make scientific progress or breakthroughs in public health without relying on animal models for certain questions. And so by taking that extremist standpoint — that essentially cuts off scientific progress and potential treatments for the public.”

I asked Alice Ra'anan, director of government relations and science policy at the American Physiological Society, whether she had seen an organization like White Coat Waste during her 25-year career at the APS. She said that bipartisan efforts for animal rights were not new. “What I think is a little different is the explicit rhetoric alleging government spending, and [that] the tactics are more explicitly directed toward members of Congress,” Ra'anan said.

I asked her if that rhetoric seemed to be working. “I think they're using the kinds of tactics that are being used broadly in our society in political discourse,” she said. “I will leave you to judge how effective these kinds of tactics are.”

Probably the most forceful responses to White Coat Waste have come from Cindy Buckmaster, director of the Center for Comparative Medicine at Baylor College of Medicine and the chair of Americans for Medical Progress, an organization that supports responsible animal research. In our conversation, Buckmaster criticized White Coat Waste's tactics, which she characterizes as "extremist." And she expressed frustration that too few people understand the kinds of tradeoffs that push scientists to use animals for their research, all in the pursuit of developing treatments that will save human lives.

What would happen if the federal government simply stopped doing animal research? "It would be catastrophic," Buckmaster said. "Basically, what happens is biomedical progress stops in its tracks."



"Taxpayers shouldn't be forced to pay over \$15 billion every year for wasteful and cruel experiments on dogs, cats, monkeys and other animals," the group declares on its website. Critics, however, say it's not that simple.

For his part, Bellotti considers such claims to be overheated, and he described the FDA's most recent decision to halt the nicotine experiments as "a complete and total win." White Coat Waste and its partners, he told me, were feeling "absolute euphoria."

"Have a Kickstarter, do a bake sale, sell Girl Scout cookies — I don't care how you do it. Just don't make me pay for it."

As he sees it, ending taxpayer-funded animal research would do little to prevent the sort of pioneering, breakthrough-driven research that Buckmaster and others say would come to a halt. Rather, Bellotti argues, the private sector would simply pick up the slack for lifesaving research that requires animal subjects. "If you're really saving sick kids, then a lot of money can be made from that," he told me. "Surely someone would want to invest in a miracle cure for sick veterans or sick kids. And they will! There's pharma, there's Wall Street, there's Silicon Valley. Have a Kickstarter, do a bake sale, sell Girl Scout cookies — I don't care how you do it. Just don't make me pay for it."

To be sure, the debate over federal funding for research in general, and about the use of animal models in particular, was roiling long before Bellotti and his allies came onto the scene. Critics of animal research, after all, have long argued that medical researchers rely too heavily on animal models, which often fail to produce results that apply to human beings. And there are robust debates over the current government model of basic research funding. The problem is that Bellotti's conviction that scientists are burning through billions of dollars on cruel and senseless research is, by almost any fair assessment, a woefully distorted caricature — one that fails to capture both the nuances of these longstanding debates, and the very real ethical challenges that go into making decisions about when animal research is justified.

And yet, the White Coat Waste Project, with its strident calls for government transparency, does shine a bright light on a problem that is inherent to the nation's multibillion-dollar research funding complex — and it's an issue on which both Bellotti and Buckmaster would seem to agree: Ordinary citizens have very little voice in determining how their tax dollars are spent in the pursuit of basic science.

"You've got to be able to explain what you do," said Bellotti, issuing a challenge to researchers.

Buckmaster seemed to welcome that conversation.

The public, she said, "are actually the ones demanding [animal research] every time they say they want a cure for this and that. They deserve to know exactly how these cures and treatments come to be."

Michael Schulson is an American freelance writer covering science, religion, technology, and ethics. His work has been published by Pacific Standard magazine, Aeon, New York magazine, and The Washington Post, among other outlets, and he writes the Matters of Fact and Tracker columns for Undark.

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